FREEING THE NATURAL VOICE Linkla"

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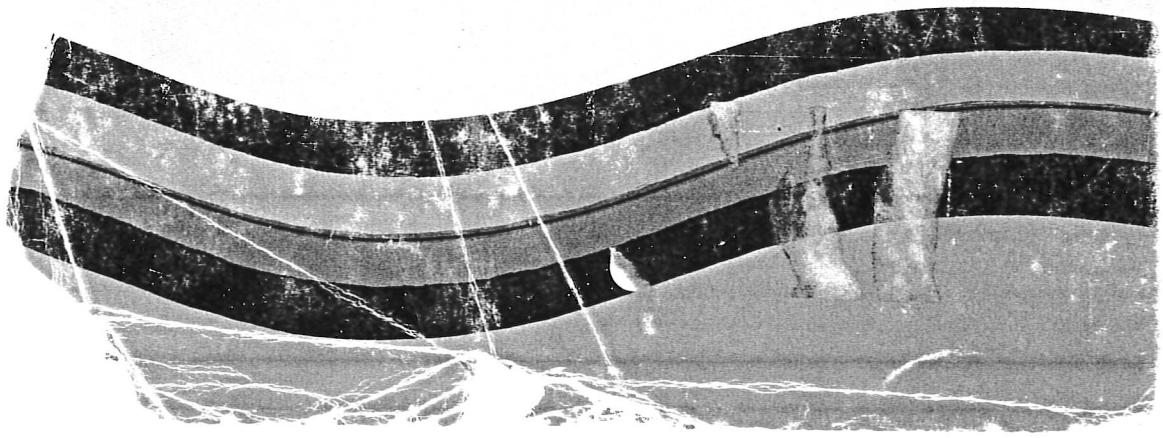
Kristin Linklater



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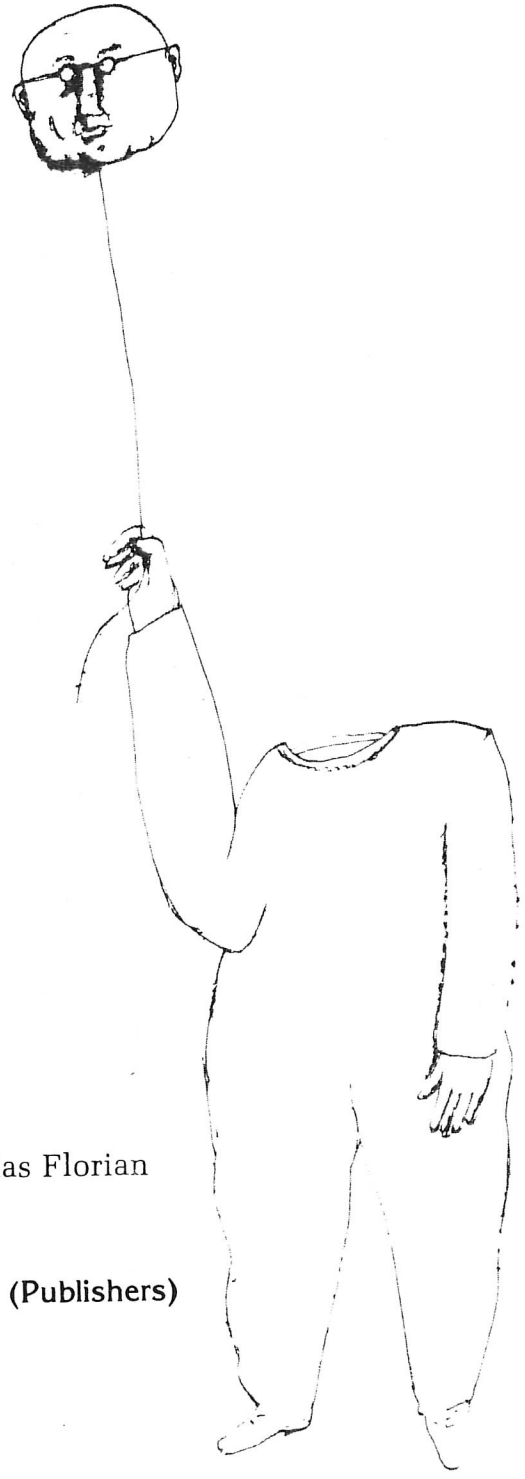

*Drawings by* Douglas Florian

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First Edition

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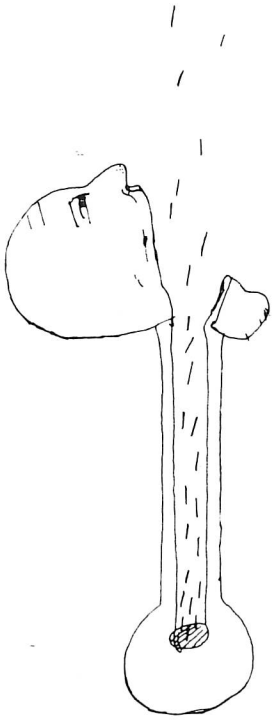
# Part one:
# The freeing process



# 3: The spine: the support of breath

The first step toward freeing the natural voice is to develop an ability to perceive habits and register new experiences. Such ability must be mental and physical, and the perception eventually refined to extreme subtlety in order to observe the minutiae of neuro-muscular behavior that serves the need to communicate. It is fruitless to demand such subtlety in the beginning since few people have immediate capacity for fine psycho-physical awareness; carefully graded steps must be taken to arrive at a state which can be trusted to feed back reliable information.

The first exercise will be useless if you read quickly through the instructions and realize that the resultant movements are to stretch and drop down the spine. It is a familiar exercise, and can be done quite mechanically, achieving some superficial release through the large external muscles of the body. But it is the process by which the stretch and the dropping down are arrived at that constitutes the exercise. It is generally true in all the exercises, that it is not *what* you are doing that is important, but *how* you are doing it. The conscious mind has an alarming capacity for subverting new experiences, either confusing them with something familiar and safe, or leaping ahead to the result and by-passing the process. For instance, to greet the sense of deep relaxation with the comment, "This is how I feel just before I go to sleep at night," reinforces the familiar equation of sleep and relaxation, successfully precluding a new possibility: that of relaxation generating energy. The overall aim of the work on the

spine is to develop physical awareness through specific relaxation. As unnecessary knots of tension undo, they release trapped energy into the body, creating a lively state of awareness and potential mobility.

More specifically, you will find that the efficiency of the vocal apparatus depends on the alignment of the body and the economy with which it functions. When the spine is out of alignment its ability to support the body is diminished and muscles intended for other things must provide that support. If the lower spine is weak, the abdominal muscles supply substitute strength for the torso; if the abdominal muscles are employed in holding up the body, they are not free to respond to breathing needs. Similarly, if the upper part of the spine abandons its job of carrying the rib cage and shoulder girdle, the rib muscles may take on the responsibility of holding the chest high, in which case they are unavailable for intercostal breathing. Finally, when the vertebrae of the neck are not well aligned, the whole channel through which the voice travels is distorted. With a weak neck, the jaw muscles, tongue muscles, laryngeal muscles, even lips and eyebrows become supporters of the head, leaving little chance of a free passage for sound.

Moshe Feldenkrais says in his invaluable book, *Awareness Through Movement:*

> "Any posture is acceptable in itself as long as it does not conflict with the law of nature, which is that the skeletal structure should counteract the pull of gravity, leaving the muscles free for movement. The nervous system and the frame develop together under the influence of gravity in such a way that the skeleton will hold up the body without expending energy despite the pull of gravity. If, on the other hand, the muscles have to carry out the job of the skeleton, not only do they use energy needlessly, but they are prevented from carrying out their main function of changing the position of the body, that is, of movement."

The first step, then, in freeing the voice, *is getting acquainted with your spine.*

The more you can imagine the movements in terms of the skeleton, the more economically the muscles will work. Let your mind talk to your bones.

**STEP 1** ■ *Stand easily with your feet six or eight inches apart.*
*Be aware of your weight evenly distributed over both feet; be aware that you are balanced equally between your toes and your heels.*
*In your mind's eye picture the bones of your feet.*

*Picture the shin bones growing up from your ankle joints.*

*Picture your thigh bones growing up from your knee joints.*

*Picture your hip joints and the pelvic girdle.*

*Picture your spine growing up from the pelvic girdle, through the small of the back, between the shoulder blades, with the rib cage floating round it and the shoulder girdle on top.*

*Feel the arms hanging from the shoulder sockets.*

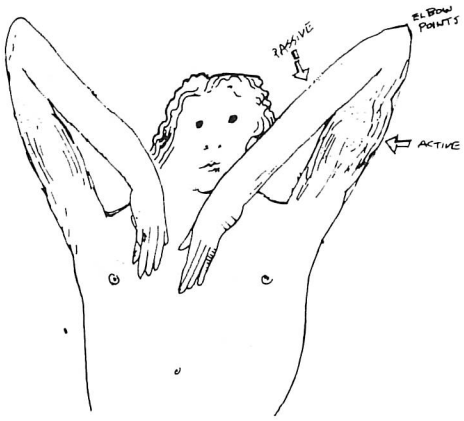
*Picture the upper arm bones, the elbow joints, the forearms, the wrist joints, the bones of the hands and fingers. Let your mind flow back up through your arms and into the neck.*

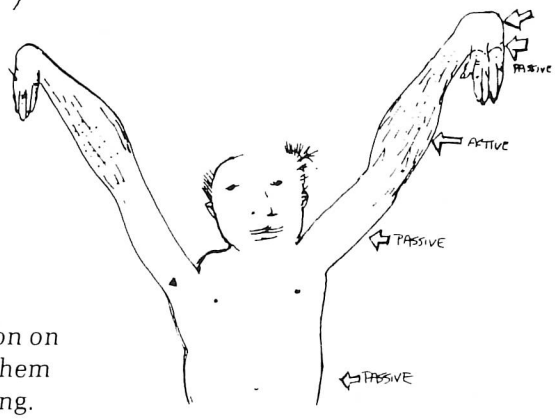
*Picture the neck vertebrae going up into the skull.*

*Picture the skull floating, like a balloon, off the top of the spine.*

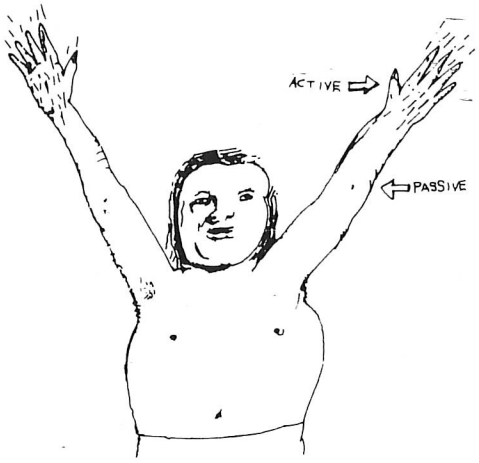
**STEP 2**

■ *Focus your attention into your elbow joints, and let them float gently up toward the ceiling. This should involve the upper arms only—no shoulder muscles, no forearm muscles, no hand muscles.*




■ *Focus your attention on your wrists, and let them float toward the ceiling.*




■ *Focus your attention on your finger tips, and let them float to the ceiling.*

*Imagine someone pulls you up a little by your finger tips, and allow your whole torso to be stretched from above; leave your legs out of the stretch.*

■ *Now do one thing and one thing only: Let your hands relax until they hang from your wrists.*

*Register the contrasting sensations in your hands and in your arms.*

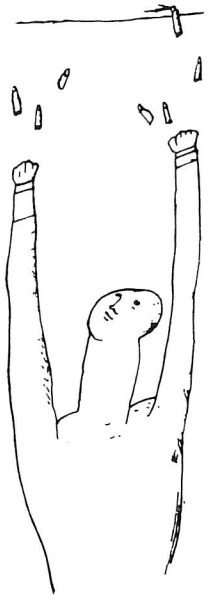
*Now let your forearms relax until they hang loose from the elbows.*

*Register the contrasting sensations in the forearms and hands, and in the upper arms and shoulders.*

*Now let the arms drop heavily, to hang loosely from the shoulders.*

*Register the weight of the arms, the blood running back into the hands, the temperature changes.*

*Now let the weight of the head drop heavily forward so that the head and neck hang off the top of the torso.*



*The fingertips float toward the ceiling.*

■ *Feel the weight of the head dragging on the spine, and gradually give in to the weight, so that the spine undoes, giving in to gravity, vertebra by vertebra, from the top down. Try to picture the vertebrae one by one.*

*Let your knees relax so that the weight remains over the middle of the feet.*

*Check that your weight does not rock back on your heels, or forward on your toes. Check that your knees do not lock. When the weight is too much to support through balance, release the spine quickly, and hang upside down.*

*Imagine your torso is hanging from your tailbone, giving in to the force of gravity.*

*Breathe easily. You are doing this to relax all the torso muscles, shoulder muscles, neck muscles, head and arms.*

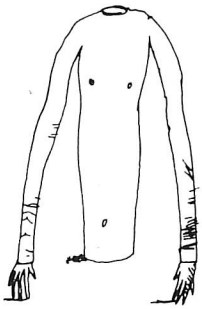
■ *Now focus your attention on your tailbone and, from there, begin to build the spine up again, vertebra by vertebra, as though building a castle of nursery bricks one on top of the other.*

*Do not use the stomach muscles; leave them hanging loose; breathe.*

*Do not suddenly straighten the knees; let them gradually straighten as the balance shifts.*

*Find the vertebrae that lift the rib cage, and build them up from the small of the back. You are now an upright, headless torso.*

*Focus on the top seven vertebrae that make up the neck, and gradually build them up on top of the rest of the spine. Be aware that the head floats up as a result of the neck build. You do not "lift your head."*



**STEP 3**

*You are now an upright headless torso.*

■ *Let your mind travel from your feet, up through your legs, to the torso, and consciously relax any muscles that begin to tighten in the stomach, buttocks, shoulders, neck. You are actively transferring the energy needed to remain upright from the large, external muscles of the body, to an internal picture of the spine constantly working against the force of gravity. It is as though the spine is a stream of upward-moving energy, fueled by the mind.*

■ *Be aware of the shape your body cuts in the air.*

■ *Be aware of the feeling of air touching your skin.*

■ *Now, closing your eyes, turn your attention inward and become aware of your body from inside, for one or two minutes.*

■ *Stretch, yawn, shake your body all over.*

**STEP 4**

It is good to do this sequence with your eyes closed, so, if you are working on your own, read the following instructions through before starting.

■ *Standing easily, with a sense of the spine moving upward, supporting the torso, close your eyes again. With the purpose of relaxing the inner muscles of your body, let your mind's eye travel from the inside of the top of your skull down the inside of the mask of your face, down through your throat, down through your chest.*

*Notice the tiny, inevitable movement of your breathing as you move your mind down into the stomach, down through the intestines and lower stomach into the groin. Undo any holding tensions you find inside. Keep the spine moving upward as you relax the muscles around it or you will collapse.*

■ *Allow the whole of the inside of the torso to be available to the movement of your breath.*

*Observe the reaction of the inside of your body to the involuntary movements of your breathing apparatus.*

*Then, deep inside, feel the need to yawn and stretch; begin to yield to that need.*

*Yawn, stretch, shake out your body as though getting up in the morning, or as a dog yawns, stretches, then shakes his skin back into place on the bones.*

■ *Register how your body feels; register how you feel.*

In the course of this exercise you have made conscious decisions about how your physical energy is to be deployed. If you have followed the process in detail, both mentally and physically, you will have dislodged a few habitual muscle responses. You should have experienced quite clearly the contrasting sensations of relaxation and tension in parts of the body that are relatively easy to contact. This experience is the basis for developing the ability to notice tensions in more inaccessible parts of the body (such as the back of the tongue, the center of the diaphragm, the upper lip), and to be able to release them.

The ability to relax must be cultivated slowly and with specific intent, otherwise it degenerates into the state of general collapse that Jerzy Grotowski rightly disparaged: "One cannot be completely relaxed as is taught in many theatre schools, for he who is totally relaxed is nothing more than a wet rag." There is, however, a vital difference between relaxing for the sake of relaxation, which inevitably includes mental collapse, and relaxing in order to do something. The aim is to remove unnecessary tensions so that the muscles are free to respond to impulse, without the short-circuiting created by habit.

*. . . nothing more than a wet rag*

# 4: Breathing: the source of sound

Having reached a state of some awareness and relaxation through exploring the spine, it is now possible to begin to explore the breathing process. The complexities of the breathing machinery are such that it is wise not to jump to any conclusions about how it works at this juncture. Instead, begin to develop the ability to *observe without controlling*. The aim is to remove habitual muscular controls and allow the involuntary processes to take over. It is quite possible for the conscious mind to become aware of the function of the involuntary nervous system without interfering, but it is an unfamiliar activity. The tendency may be to observe, correctly, that when you breathe in, your stomach moves out, and when you breathe out your stomach goes in, and to use that observation to start controlling the breath with the stomach muscles. You might start to pull your stomach in, which blows the breath out, and to push your stomach out, which draws the breath in. This is a misuse of perception. The involuntary breathing muscles are subtle, complex, powerful and deep inside the body. Any voluntary controls that you apply will involve muscles that are large, clumsy, external, and at several removes from the lungs. Conscious control of the breath will destroy its sensitivity to changing inner states, and severely curtail the reflex connection of breathing and emotional impulse. It is worth repeating here the warning that *you cannot imitate a reflex action*. Natural breathing is reflexive, and the only work you can do to restore its potential is to remove restrictive tensions and provide it with a diversity of stimuli.

These stimuli will provoke deeper and stronger reflex actions than are normally exercised in habit-run daily lives.

It is a good idea to start the observation of your breathing in a standing position so that later you may benefit by contrasting observations when you lie down or hang upside down.

**STEP 1** ■ *Repeat the physical awareness spine exercises in Chapter 3.*

**STEP 2** ■ *Standing easily, with a long spine, relaxed muscles and your mind centered in the middle of your body, allow your involuntary breathing rhythm to tell you what it is.*

Consciously, all you can do is keep releasing tension from the stomach area, the shoulders and the lower belly, and be aware of the breath apparently moving your body, rather than your body moving the breath. Remember that your natural breathing rhythm may not be your familiar breathing rhythm.

■ *Explore the following description of the breathing process: The outgoing breath is complete inner relaxation. The incoming breath will happen automatically if you wait.*

**STEP 3** ■ *Let the breath release out of you.*

*Wait—but don't hold the muscles—until you feel the need for a new breath.*

*Yield to the need.*

*Let the breath be replaced (do not "breathe in").*

*Let the breath release again.*

*Relax into a small internal pause.*

*As soon as you feel, deep inside, the tiny impulse of need, give in to it, and allow the new breath in.*

■ *Repeat the mental processes of* Step 3, *observing the physical reactions:*

■ *Release the breath out.*

*Wait.*

*Allow the breath in.*

*Release the breath out.*

*Wait.*

*Allow the breath in.*

*Release the breath out.*

*Wait.*

*Allow the breath in . . . etc.*

These breaths are on a tiny scale, very central, and are sufficient to keep you alive from one moment to the next. The more relaxed you are, the smaller the exchange of oxygen necessary to sustain you. It is worth noting that in deep meditation breathing slows down radically, and sometimes is barely perceptible. Anxiety and tension either speed up the breathing rate, or slow it down laboriously, or dictate a longer, heavier exchange.

STEP 4 ■ *Continue the breathing awareness found in Step 3 and let your mouth drop open so that you are breathing through your mouth, not through your nose. Don't open wide, just enough to allow the breath to pass through.*

If your mouth is relaxed, the breath should automatically arrive in a small "fff" somewhere between the top teeth and the lower lip.

■ *Don't make a "fff" sound; let it be the natural by-product of the release of breath from inside and the relaxed position of the mouth.*

According to individual mouths, the "fff" may occur more obviously between the two lips rather than the teeth and lower lip; the important point is, that with the small "fff" you begin to program the breath to release from the center of the body and arrive in the front of the mouth, which is what happens with a free sound. All breathing awareness exercises are blueprints for sound; it is therefore essential that all breathing exercises should be done with the mouth open, as it is when speaking. In repose, or when walking in the street, it is aesthetically and hygienically practical to breathe through the nose, which serves to clean, filter and moisten the air on its long, relatively slow passage to the lungs. For speaking, the breath must be able to respond quickly to fast-changing impulse, and the direct, wide passage through the mouth is clearly needed. If you open the mouth too wide, however, the breath will arrive most obviously in the throat rather than the front of the mouth, making a "hhhhh" rather than a "fffff." This programs a route for sound which also emphasizes the throat, and is not free.

In practicing the breathing awareness exercises, it is vital to realize the difference between saying "the breath should be in the front of the mouth, so I will put it there," and "the breath will arrive in the front of the mouth if it is released freely from inside and there is no tension on the way out which holds it back." It is necessary to condition the mind to be interested primarily in the causal, release point, not the resultant, arrival point.

STEP 5 ■ *Continue the awareness of your natural breathing rhythm.*

*Mouth just open, small "ffff" 's on each outgoing breath.*

*Feel that your breath and your observing mind are both in the same place: the center of your body. Make sure that you are not split in two, with part of you sitting up in your head, commenting from above. You and your breathing are one and the same thing. When your breath releases,* you *release.*

■ *Now feed into your middle the impulse for a gentle sigh of relief. No sound.*

*Observe how your breathing reacts to the stimulus of a simple easy feeling of relief*

You will find that more breath comes in, in response to the impulse, and that more breath releases out, on a longer "fffffff" as the relief pours out.

■ *Again consciously decide to feel a sigh of relief. Consciously observe the reaction in the involuntary breathing musculature.*

■ *Imagine that your mind (the impulse-dispatcher), your feelings (impulse-receiver), and your breath are all in the same place: the center of your body.*

■ *Again feed in the impulse to sigh with relief.*

*Feel the relief deep inside your body.*

*Release the relief and the breath as one.*

*Relax inside. Allow the breath to be replaced.*

You can *affect* the breathing musculature, *provoke* it to greater efforts, but do not confuse the consciousness of emotional control, through the application of emotional impulses, with conscious muscular control.

**STEP 6**

■ *Make it all easy now by lying flat on your back on the floor and observing the breathing processes in a position where no energy is being expended on remaining upright. All the attention can now go into noticing how the breathing works when the body is* fully *relaxed.*

■ *Lying on your back, let your whole body give in to gravity.*

■ *Send your mind into the soles of your feet and think of relaxing your toes and feet so that they appear to drop away from your ankles.*

*Imagine your ankle joints are filled with air.*

*Let your calf muscles relax so that the flesh, skin and muscles seem to dissolve off the shinbones.*

*Imagine your knee joints are filled with air.*

*Let your thigh muscles relax so that the flesh, skin and muscles seem to dissolve off the thigh bones.*

*Imagine your hip joints and thigh sockets are filled with air so that the legs do not seem to be attached to the torso. Let your buttock muscles, pelvic muscles, groin and lower belly muscles dissolve and melt.*

*Be aware of your spine giving in to gravity from the tailbone to the skull.*

*Let the small of the back relax, but realize that there is a natural curve there—don't try to flatten it out.*

*Let the whole stomach area melt, dissolve, relax.*

*Picture the part of the back that is between the shoulder blades spreading away from the spine to either side.*

*Imagine the rib bones as soft as the belly: Let them give in to gravity and release into breath.*

*Picture the torso as releasing into length and breadth along and across the floor.*

■ *Imagine your shoulder sockets are filled with air, so that your arms seem to be hardly attached to the torso.*

*Be aware of the weight of your arms and hands, heavy and abandoned on the floor.*

*Be aware of your fingers.*

■ *Let your attention travel back up your arms, through your shoulders and into your neck.*

*Let your neck-spine give in to gravity, but realize there is a natural curve in these top seven vertebrae—don't try to flatten it.*

*Let your throat relax.*

*Feel the weight of your head on the floor.*

■ *Let the jaw muscles relax right beside the ears so that your teeth are not clenched.*

*Let the tongue relax inside the mouth so that it is not clamped to the roof of the mouth.*

*Be aware of your face muscles and let them melt so that the skin of the face feels heavy on the bones.*

*Let the cheeks go and the lips, the forehead, the eyelids.*

*Let the scalp muscles relax.*

■ *Now let your attention sweep back down through your whole body, abandoned on the floor.*

*Imagine you could melt down through the floor.*

*Take a little time to enjoy this sensation.*

*Now become aware that in the middle of the stillness of your completely relaxed body, there is an inevitable, easy rise and fall as your breath enters and leaves you.*

*Feel the cool air being drawn in from outside through your nose or mouth, traveling down to the center of your torso, and being released from there, warm, to escape again to the outside.*

*Flop a hand onto the breathing area so that you can feel from outside what is happening inside.*

*Notice that on the outgoing breath, the area under your hand can fall straight toward the ground.*

*Feed a deep sigh of relief far down into your body—imagine the relief going right down into the groin—and let the feeling fall out of you with abandon.*

Here, you are enlisting the aid of gravity to increase the possibility of complete muscular release on the outgoing breath. The whole belly area should be able to drop suddenly, without controls, with much the same quality of release that happens if you lift your arm off the floor and then let it relax completely, giving in suddenly to gravity. You can test the mind's willingness to relinquish physical control of breathing, by asking it to hand the process over to the pull of gravity. Until you can remove all controls, there is no way of choosing controls when necessary; you are still prey to unconscious habitual controls.

The exercise, therefore, is:

■ *Feed in the relief (causal impulse).*

*Let it fly out of you uncensored by controls (resultant communication).*

■ *Observe that a deeper sigh of relief stimulates a larger breath experience.*

*Observe that the impulse moves the breath and the breath moves the body.*

If you think along these lines you are less likely to add extra effort to the economical work performed by the involuntary nervous system.

■ *Explore varying degrees of strength in causal impulse feeding into the breathing center; from natural breathing, to a small, contented*

*sigh, to a larger, grateful sigh, to a huge, deep sigh of relief (imagine something bad was going to happen, but was averted).*

*Relax back to natural breathing.*

**STEP 7** ■ *Slowly, with complete physical awareness, get up from the floor to a standing position.*

*See how much you can retain of the physical sensations you experienced while on the floor, for instance:*

*Imagine that the floor is still supporting your back.*

*Leave your stomach muscles as sloppy as they were when you were lying down.*

*Imagine the force of gravity is behind you and let the stomach wall fall with it on the outgoing breath.*

*Observe the natural rhythm of your breathing.*

*Observe any differences between breathing lying down and standing up.*

*Observe any differences there may be between your breathing now and the last time you were aware of it while standing.*

*Know what you are experiencing not in terms of right and wrong but in terms of* change.

Where, specifically, in your body do you feel movement in response to breath? In your ribs? Back? Sides? Belly? Groin? Internally? Externally?

What feels better than before? What feels worse? How do you feel?

Where is the breath releasing from? Where is it going?

Do you feel more awake? Do you feel sleepy? Do you feel confused?

*Have you found anything new?*

I will not provide any answers to these questions. It is important that each person who is working on self in this particular field keeps asking such questions, and answers with a growing knowledge of what is true in the individual, organic experience.

The difficulty, in working on oneself, is to admit new experiences. Most of us have considerable investment in our conditioning because it has gotten us this far already, is reasonably reliable and is safe. If you can ask yourself, from the start, questions about the *new* sensations you have experienced, and even make it an exercise to articulate your answers in specific terms out loud, you will learn and change twice as fast. As has been pointed out before, the mind is re-

luctant to embrace deep change, and will play devious games to maintain the status quo. We are dealing with functions that should be automatic and it takes great determination to change habits programmed at this level. In these exercises the new experiences are on a deeper level of consciousness than your everyday level; when you verbalize the experience you bring it up to a more familiar level of consciousness and the new experience becomes reinforced, making a firmer imprint.

Here is a scene enacted, with variations, quite often in the course of voice classes I have taught, which shows some of the ways the mind escapes change.

The pupil has been taken through the work described in this and the previous chapter, and it is visibly evident that the breathing is deeper in the body, freer, less labored.

*Me:* How do you feel?

*Pupil:* Fine. Good.

*Me:* *What* do you feel?

*Pupil:* I don't know exactly.

*Me:* Do you feel any differences?

*Pupil:* Not really. I feel dizzy, and a bit sick.

*Me:* What about your breathing? (Silence). Do you notice it affecting any new parts of your body?

*Pupil:* Oh, yes. It's much easier.

*Me:* Where?

*Pupil:* Wait a minute, I'll have to think back. Mmmmm—yes—well, I've never felt it in my lower back before. (Or stomach, or legs, it doesn't matter.)

*Me:* What do you feel happens there now?

*Pupil:* Well, it's sort of as though I breathe into my buttocks (Or pelvis, or knees, etc.).

*Me:* OK, fine.

*Pupil:* Is that right?

*Me:* If you feel it, then it's happened, and that's fine for the time being.

*Pupil:* But are you supposed to breathe in your ass?

We might then go on to discuss the fact that the lungs only go down as far as the diaphragm, which cuts the body in two, horizontally; that when breath goes in, the diaphragm moves down, pushing the stomach down, which in turn pushes the lower intestines down, so that there are graphic movements in the lower torso in response to

breath. These movements are not confined to the front of the body, and the lower spine must be free of tension to allow full use of the breathing apparatus. It will then lengthen and shorten in response to large breathing demands, helping to create the greatest space possible inside the torso into which the lungs can expand. These spine movements are imperceptible when standing, but can easily be observed when lying face downwards.

The important thing in badgering the pupil about what had happened in the course of the exercise was to find even one specific point in the general experience which could be articulated and therefore learned both organically and consciously. The diversionary tactics employed by the pupil's mind to avoid coping with something new were, roughly as follows: The first answer, "fine—good," hopes that I will be flattered by the success of the exercise and leave him alone. Secondly, "I don't know" can be interpreted as "let me enjoy my subjective experience which is private, personal and will be spoiled if I talk about it"; it is generally resistant. Thirdly, "I will not admit change for the better; I will concentrate on this rather unpleasant, disoriented, dizzy feeling." It is very natural to feel a bit dizzy (a) on standing up after lying on the floor for some time, because of the alteration in the balance mechanism, and (b) because, with deep relaxation, more oxygen begins to enter and leave the body, stimulating circulation and pumping more blood to the heart and the brain. This is a healthy situation, but until the body adjusts to the newness of it, there may be some dizziness. As this is quite a common experience, and one that sometimes causes alarm, I will digress for a moment on that subject.

If you can learn to accept dizziness when it occurs, you will not be sick; though you may feel it, you will not fall down; you may feel you are about to fall but you will find you can embrace the state as a useful disorientation out of which you can explore a new use of yourself. If, however, you are frightened by the dizziness you *may* throw up, you *can* faint and, by so doing, you will have successfully used it to escape from a new experience. The release of tension in some extremely nervous people, and the consequent submission of the lungs to the powerful involuntary nervous system, can be such a turnover in the whole state of being that dizziness is a way of life for a time. Once such people have fainted a couple of times, they become familiar with the process and find the moment when they can choose to go with it and regularly pass out, or focus on something more interesting such as the exercise in hand. This may sound callous but without such confrontation, significant change and growth can be postponed forever. It should also be emphasized that it is not necessary to faint in order to liberate your breathing.

In this chapter the initial attitude to the breathing process that

has been suggested is that the involuntary nervous system does it best. That, if you allow the breathing to tell you what it wants, you do not have to waste energy controlling or sustaining it consciously. That, the ultimate controls for the breath are thoughts and feelings. That, instead of sending active messages to yourself, such as "breathe in," "breathe out," "take a breath," "inhalation," "exhalation," you send passive messages such as "allow the breath to replace," "let the breath release," "let the breath drop in," or "fall out"; "incoming breath" and "outgoing breath." It takes longer in the beginning, but once reprogrammed, you will find the newly found *natural* way much more efficient than anything you could devise.